

Are We One?

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When I was teaching a million years ago, I read my classes a book entitled “The People Who Hugged The Trees.” It’s an environmental folk tale set in India, about a little girl named Amrita who hugged the trees everyday. She loved her trees, for providing shade from the sun, protecting her people from sandstorms, and pointing the way to water sources. When she learned that the powerful prince wanted to chop down the trees to build a new fortress to display his power, she taught the people in her village to hug the trees. I paired this story with the Bible, where in Genesis humans are told to take care of the earth and that we should be like wise trees standing by the water in Psalm 1. I had a brilliant idea to take my classes across the street to a city park full of old live oaks. The assignment? To adopt a tree and hug it. Become ONE with it. I knew this would make instant environmentalists out of them.

You know what happened? These kids were a bunch of whiners! Ms. Miller, there are bugs on the ground. Ms. Miller, there are bugs on the tree. Ms. Miller, I am hot. Ms. Miller when can we go in? The complaints! They hated it! I mean it was Florida, hot and muggy, but still...who doesn’t want to become One with a Tree?

I had my work cut out for me.

I had this dog, once, named Venus. She was a happy plump border collie mix. When she wasn’t outside treeing squirrels, she would sit really close to you, panting in your face. Once, a college student was petsetting, and she commented that she felt like Venus was trying to breathe in her soul. Secretly, I think Venus knew that she was one with everyone, and therefore by mixing her essence with the closest human, she might even score a treat.

Seriously though, if you have had a pet, you might know what I am talking about—that sense of hearing their heartbeat, their breath, their gaze—it makes you wonder what they are thinking, how they feel, all the things. There is, for me at least, a kind of spiritual connection, a relationship that is wondrous.

At my house, we are ONE with our beloved animal friends.

In her book, *The Soul of an Octopus*, naturalist Sy Montgomery chronicles her experiences with several octopuses: ..."gentle Athena, assertive Octavia, curious Kali, and joyful Karma." The mollusks were quite clever, escaping enclosures worthy of the smarts of an orangutan; jetting water so they could bounce balls, and endlessly tricking companions with multiple 'sleights of hand' to get food.

Montgomery writes about an early meeting with Athena, who used her suckers to "taste" Montgomery:

Had a person attempted to taste me so soon after we met, I would have been alarmed; but since Athena was an octopus, I was thrilled. Although we couldn't have been more different — I, a terrestrial vertebrate constrained by joints and bound to air; she, a marine mollusk with not a single bone, who breathed water — she was clearly as curious about me as I was about her."

It is clear that Montgomery has incredible synergy with her subjects—each chapter is a love story to each octopus she meets. I felt ONE with the octopuses as I read her book!

Some may think this fanciful.

Yet, when Montgomery quotes American naturalist's Henry Beston, *The Outermost House*, written in 1938, I resonate:

Animals "are not brethren, they are not underlings" but beings "gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear." They are, he writes, "other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of the earth."

"Fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of the earth."

We are one, and yet different parts of the same creation, birthed from the same Creating Spirit, sharing this earth life that presents oh so much beauty, and oh so much anguish.

An earth we share, an earth where human activity is cause of climate crisis. At the expense of the rest of our earth kindred. Think bees, butterflies and polar bears. I would argue that in the history of our world home, well, the past couple of hundred years? 150 years? most humans haven't been living as ONE with our created world, but rather exploiting it.

This is, in spite of Climate scientists sounding alarm that the world is way off track for preventing climate catastrophe. China, the US, India and the EU account for more than 56% of total global emissions. There are 20 corporations in the WORLD that are responsible for over a 1/3 of the world's carbon emissions.

What is the point of climate activism in the face of what our governments and corporations NEED TO BE DOING NOW? My little campaign of reducing my use of plastic feels futile.

I am not alone. There is a sudden and dramatic rise in people experiencing a profound sense of anxiety in the face of our dying planet. This is known as ecological grief or climate despair. Wikipedia's definition is "grief felt in relation to experienced or anticipated ecological losses, including the loss of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to acute or chronic environmental change."^[6]

"For example, scientists witnessing the decline of Australia's Great Barrier Reef report experiences of anxiety, hopelessness, and despair.^[7] Groups impacted heavily also include young people feeling betrayal from lack of environmental action by governments and the multitude of indigenous communities losing their livelihoods."

One of the first references to the idea of climate grief is in Aldo Leopold's "A Sand County Almanac" published in 1949. He wrote: that "one the penalties of an ecological education is to live alone in a world of wounds."

A world caught in the valley of the shadow of death.
Where evil is indeed real, the shadows of hardship, futility and death
overtaking green pastures and still waters. It is isolating and terrifying.

Climate advocate Bill McKibben recognizes exponential growth of climate grief especially among the younger generation who will have to deal with the profound effects of climate crisis in ways we never have had to. He believes that finding circles of safety and support to speak grief out loud, in community, is an essential action in the climate advocacy movement.

As people of faith, our biblical tradition calls this lament.

Lament is giving voice to what it means to be in the shadow of the valley of death, describing the desolation and distress of our hearts and minds, in community. Many of our Psalms are Psalms of Lament^{^^} with the intent to be sung in the communal context of worship. They bleak and hopeless—but community provides a container to safely hold the depths of despair.

McKibben writes “Speaking for myself, after a lifetime of climate activism, I find that such action of (climate grief circles) is one form of important solace. The most terrifying idea is that one has been left more or less alone to deal with all of this, and that of course is the message our hyperindividualized society delights in sending. Even the solutions – which car to buy? – are usually posed as individual. But I think the most effective thing an individual can do is to be a tiny bit less of an individual, instead joining with others to build the movements large enough to have some hope of making change. And I sense, at least for me, that that may be the most emotionally healing thing one can do as well.”

In order to be one, we have to practice being one in community the midst of our hypo-individualized culture.

Are we one? How do we that?

I think as we practice being one, we become one. This is why we show up on Sunday mornings, and on forest bathing hikes with Mountain True, or working in the garden together.

By being one with the others with whom we were created— including the trees in the forest or your backyard (c'mon, just a little hug?) or sitting quietly outside listening to birdsong, or watching them interact—we can even learn better about being One in communal creation.

A little over a week ago, there was a story on the nightly news of extremely rare footage of baby emperor penguins jumping off a 50 foot ice shelf in Antarctica. Juvenile emperors usually fledge from the sea ice, hopping just a couple feet into the ocean. But these fledglings found themselves in a tricky location for entering the water. The video captures hundreds baby emperors crowding near the edge, like they are thinking, “I see the ocean, that’s where I need to go to get food, but this does not look like a fun jump.”

One lone chick steps closer to the edge, and kind of shakes its little shoulders before it goes for it and leaps. It makes a big splash and soon after is swimming with ease.

The rest of the chicks take this as a sign, and they start launching a few at a time every couple of seconds. The first brave jumpers give confidence to the others.

While scientists do not think the cliff-jumping incident was directly related to climate change warming Antarctica, they are concerned the the continuing decline of sea ice on the continent may force more emperors to breed on ice shelves, making perilous jumps like this more common in the future. While the decline of the sea ice poses dire consequences for the penguins’ long term survival, some scientists remains hopeful about the emperors’ ability to adapt. The recent high dive is a testament to their hardiness. Biologist Michelle LaRue remarks,

They’re incredibly resilient...They have been around for millions of years; they’ve seen lots of different changes in their environment. It’s a question of how rapidly they’re able to deal with the changes that are happening—and how far they can be pushed.

When I watched the video, I had the overwhelming sense these penguins, were one with each other in doing a scary thing. They shared their

trepidation and their courage. That little brave first penguin took on the role of leading, and the rest went for it.

We can do that too.

We can share the scary, the sad, the fear, the roadblocks.

We can share the resilience and courage, too.

We can remember, like that little first penguin, that God is not the only one who can act as shepherd, but we can step into that role sometimes, too.

Are we One?

I don't know about you, but I long to be.

Amen.

SOURCES

Sy Montgomery, [The Soul of an Octopus](#)

As climate chaos accelerates, which countries are polluting the most?
<https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2023/12/us/countries-climate-change-emissions-cop28/>

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